

The Four Noble Truths & the Noble Eightfold Path

The four noble truths are the main teaching in Buddhism. All the teachings that the Buddha has preached can be summarized in the four noble truths like all the footprints of animals in the jungle can be included on the footprint of an elephant. This is the unique discovery when the Bodhisatta attained the enlightenment. Before the Buddha realized it, there were some ascetics who had known some levels of Dukka, but the Buddha discovered very special thing which is the noble truth of suffering. That is unique to the world. Here it is very important to understand the difference between;

1. The suffering and the noble truth of suffering.
2. The origin and the noble truth of the origin of suffering.
3. The cessation and the noble truth of the cessation of suffering.
4. The path and the noble truth of the path that leads to getting rid of suffering.

Beings with ignorance have been coming from birth to birth for a long time because of unknowing this world reality as it is.

1. The suffering and the noble truth of suffering (*Dukkha ariyasacca*)

Suffering is explained in Buddhist teachings in various ways according to the capacity of persons' spiritual faculties. When the Buddha met very gifted persons such as Bhahiya, Pukkusati, he has explained it in short. Even now if a person is very wise and gifted, he also can realize it. However, as ordinary people we have to learn it with details. Then we need to learn and follow more references.

According to Dhammacakka Sutta, the Buddha explains this topic in ordinary level since the five ascetic monks were gifted. There the Buddha tells the five ascetics;

Birth (*jātipi dukkhā*), aging (*Jarāpi dukkhā*), sickness (*Vyādhipi dukkho*), death (*Maranampi dukhaṃ*), union with what is displeasing (*Appiyehisampayogo dukkho*), separation from what is pleasing (*Piyehivippayogo dukkho*) and not to get what one wants are sufferings (*Yampicchaṃ na labhati tampi dukkhaṃ*). These are the negative things that we dislike in our life. When they come into our life, we suffer, worry, get upset, lament or get angry. All of these sufferings depend on ignorance of five aggregates. Finally, it is said as "In brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering" (*Samkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā dukkhā*). First seven things are not difficult to understand as suffering. Anybody, who is wise, can understand as they are suffering.

The special reason of suffering, which is never understood without a Buddha's advice, is the five aggregates. Five aggregates are;

- | | | |
|------|-------------------|---------------------|
| i. | Matter | (<i>Rūpa</i>) |
| ii. | Feelings | (<i>Vedanā</i>) |
| iii. | Perception | (<i>Saññā</i>) |
| iv. | Mental formations | (<i>Samkhāra</i>) |
| v. | Consciousness | (<i>Viññāṇa</i>) |

When we experience the world through our senses, these five aggregates arise together. They can't be separated. As the result of arising these five things, we have an experience. These five aggregates quickly arise and also cease immediately. When we experience something, they have not only arisen but ceased also. When we experience something through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue or body, these five senses can't get pleasure or pain. Those experiences cease instantly, we experience pleasure or pain in the mind as a past experience. However, we think that we experience in the present because of our ignorance. That is why we suffer. If we can understand that these five aggregates arise and cease at the moment with the condition, we are able to understand its impermanence. Then we know that we have nothing to desire or hate. It means we have overcome suffering. As far as we have this understanding, we have liberated from unsatisfactoriness.

The special discovery of the Buddha is the difference of the suffering and the noble truth of suffering. The term 'suffering or Dukkha' has been described in various places in the Sutta Pitaka and Vinaya Pitaka. As many discourses explain, suffering means birth, aging (decay), sickness, death, union with what is displeasing, separation from what is pleasing, not to get what one wants. These can be understood by anyone even without the guideline of a Supreme Buddha. However, we can see a very special explanation about suffering and the noble truth of suffering in Saccayamaka in Yamakappakarana, Abhidhamma Pitaka. There, it says;

If there is anything except physical suffering and mental suffering, that is the Noble truth of suffering, that's not suffering. (*Kāyikaṃ dukkhaṃ cetasikaṃ dukkhaṃ t̥hapetvā avasesaṃ dukkhasaccaṃ, na dukkhaṃ, Saccayamaka, Yamkappakarāṇa*). It means the very first experience we receive through our senses as a Karmic result of the past. The very first experience is neither wholesome nor unwholesome. That's neutral. When we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think something, that very first experience is just a result, but not new karma. When the first experience arises the five aggregates; form (*Rūpa*), feeling (*Vedanā*), sensation (*Saññā*), mind-objects (*Samkhāra*) and consciousness (*Viññāṇa*) arise at the moment. In the very first experience of senses, we are unable to realize something completely. That's why the Buddha says, we can't recognize something with five consciousnesses except contact (*Na pañchahi viññāṇehe kiñci dhammam pativijānāti, aññatra abhinipātamattā, Nāṇa Vibhanga, Vibhangappakarāṇa*). In the very first experience, contact and primary experience happen, but it is not complete understanding. We understand something completely by mind consciousness, but never with five consciousnesses like eye consciousness. Here the very important thing realized by the Buddha is that when we recognize something through mind consciousness, the very first experience; eye, form, eye consciousness, eye contact ect. has ceased without anything remaining. The very first experience is just a result or Vipāka. It should not be overcome. Buddhism never tells us to overcome the very first experience since even Arahant has can't do it. The very first experience should be only realized.

Next, the Buddha says in the same reference, mental suffering and physical suffering are the suffering and the noble truth of suffering as well. If we feel any pain physically or mentally, that belongs to the suffering and the noble truth of suffering as well (*Kāyikaṃ dukkhaṃ cetasikaṃ dukkhaṃ dukkhaṃ ca dukkha saccam ca, Sacca Yamaka, Yamkappakarāṇa*). Physical suffering and mental suffering belong to the noble truth of suffering too. The reason is that it arises with the foundation of the very first five aggregates which are neither wholesome nor unwholesome. The

very first experience is completely the noble truth of suffering. We understand something in the second experience which is new karma. That belongs to suffering and the noble truth of suffering as well. This Noble Truth of Suffering should be understood (*Dukkhasaccaṃ pariññeyyaṃ*).

The ordinary suffering such as birth, decay, death etc. can be understood by anyone. Before the Buddha attained enlightenment, he had known it. When he attained enlightenment, he didn't realize the same thing. That's why he says; I realized something which I had heard before when I attained enlightenment (*Pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu*). This is the very special thing what the Buddha realized. The very first experience is just five aggregates (*Pañcakkhandā*). The next experience that we understand the world is that five aggregates subject to clinging Pañcupādānakkhanda. Pancakkhanda go to Arahantas without clinging, but when it comes to ordinary people, it is pañcupadanakkhanda which is subject to clinging. It is named as Pañcupādānakkhanda or Sakkaya.

2. The noble truth of the origin of suffering (*Samudaya ariyasacca*)

The nearest cause of suffering is that craving. Ordinary people think that the cause of suffering is that craving to things and persons in the outside world. That's why some people removed everything what they had even their clothes wishing liberation. Nevertheless, they couldn't liberate from suffering. If the cause of suffering were in the outside world, it would be very easy to remove it. Everything in outside can be let go in a second. Actually, that's just the origin of suffering. In this situation, the Buddha realized the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It's the craving which belongs to our five aggregates. We attach to the world because of the craving of our own inner world, five aggregates. If the origin of suffering were in the outside world, it would be two reasons of suffering as craving and anger. But there is only reason for suffering which is craving. Both craving and anger arise because of the craving to inside (*Nandirāga*).

According to Yamakappakarana, it, which is except the origin of suffering, is that the noble truth of the origin of suffering. The noble truth of the origin of suffering is not the origin of suffering what the ordinary people have recognized (*Samudayasaccaṃ thapetvā avaseso samudayo Samudayo, na samudayasaccaṃ*). Next, it says; the noble truth of the origin of suffering is the origin and the noble truth of the origin of suffering as well (*Samudayasaccaṃ samudayo ceva samudayasaccañca*).

It's easy to understand 'Samudaya' the origin. But understanding 'Samudaya Sacca' the noble truth of suffering is not like that. 'Samudaya' is visible, but 'Samudaya Sacca' is invisible which is difficult to recognize. 'Samudaya' is outside which can be seen by our physical eyes, but 'Samudaya Sacca' is inside which should be known by the eye of wisdom (Insight). 'Samudaya Sacca' is the craving to the five aggregates. Though 'Samudaya' is removed, 'Samudaya Sacca' isn't removed. However, when 'Samudaya Sacca' is removed, 'Samudaya' is also ceased. 'Samudaya' doesn't consist with 'Samudaya Sacca', but 'Samudaya Sacca' consists with 'Samudaya'. Even though we remove everything we like in the outside world, 'Samudaya Sacca' still is within us. However, when we overcome the attachment to the five aggregates within us, all

the cravings cease immediately. This is the truth what the Buddha realized, no one had known before the Buddha. The ‘**Samudayasacca**’ should be overcome (*Samudayasaccaṃ pahātabbāṃ*).

3. The Cessation and the Noble Truth of the cessation of unsatisfactoriness (*Nirodha ariyasacca*)

We already know the cause of suffering as greed and the major underlying reason is ignorance or delusion. With this understanding if we can reflect on impermanence, we are able to overcome greed. As the result of the cessation of greed, anger and delusion, we liberate from suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

According to ‘Sacca Yamaka’ in Yamakappakarana; if there any cessation besides the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, that is ‘Nirodha’, but not ‘Nirodhasacca’. Next it explains; ‘Nirodha Sacca’ is ‘Nirodha’ and Nirodha Sacca’ as well (*Nirodhasaccaṃ thapetvā avaseso nirodho nirodho, na nirodhasaccaṃ. Nirodhasaccaṃ nirodho ceva nirodhasaccañca*). We can overcome some materials in outside world, but until inner ignorance and attachment remain within us, suffering is also within us. When someone reduces craving, hatred and delusion completely, all the sufferings are also over. Seeing this reality with wisdom, we enter the path that leads to liberation in next step. The Noble Truth of the cessation of unsatisfactoriness should be realized (*Nirodhasaccaṃ sacchikātabbāṃ*).

4. The Path (*Magga*) and the Noble Truth of the path that leads to cessation of unsatisfactoriness (*Magga ariyasacca*)

With the full understanding of the above three steps in suffering, the Buddha's disciple enters the path to get rid of suffering. The Buddha explained the path as the noble eight-fold path. According to Sacca Yamaka; if there anything besides ‘Maggasacca’, that’s ‘Magga’. That’s not ‘Maggasacca’. ‘Maggasacca’ is ‘Magga’ and ‘Maggasacca’ as well (*Maggasaccaṃ thapetvā avaseso maggo maggo, na maggasaccaṃ. Maggasaccaṃ maggo ceva maggasaccañca*).

As the result of listening to the Buddha's message, our view becomes clear. It is said in Buddhism as 'Right Understanding'. The Noble Truth of the path that leads to cessation of unsatisfactoriness should be developed’ (*Maggasaccaṃ Bhāvetabbāṃ*).

When we have 'Right Understanding', we don't stop since we have to practice other seven steps too. Then we meet a path to follow which is 'The Noble Eightfold Path' –

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Right Understanding | (<i>Sammā diṭṭhi</i>) |
| 2. Right Intention/ Thoughts | (<i>Sammā saṃkappa</i>) |
| 3. Right Speech | (<i>Sammā vācā</i>) |
| 4. Right Action | (<i>Sammā kammanta</i>) |
| 5. Right Livelihood | (<i>Sammā ājiva</i>) |
| 6. Right Effort | (<i>Sammā vāyāma</i>) |
| 7. Right Mindfulness | (<i>Sammā sati</i>) |
| 8. Right Concentration | (<i>Sammā samādhi</i>) |

Here the most important thing that we are compelled to do is to develop mindfulness. At the very beginning of practicing mindfulness, we have to identify 'the sign of mindfulness' (Sati nimitta). By focusing our attention on the tip of our nose or upper lip, we try to practice breathing meditation and later practicing other meditation techniques too, we do all our daily activities mindfully as well. Our success of meditation depends on how far we practice the sign of mindfulness. Every day we have to try to increase the time that we practice mindfulness. When we practice this, we can see the result which is happiness. The very important thing in the practice of mindfulness is the visible results. Seeing the results, we can go forward on the path of getting rid of suffering towards the purification of our mind in this short life itself. That is one of the qualities of the Dhamma which is with immediate results (*Akālika*). If we can put this knowledge into practice and get the result, we are the most fortunate people in the world. The reason is that this is the happiest thing out of everything in our life such as money, relatives, education, properties, etc. For that we have to be diligent. We should dedicate our time for that more than we do for other things.

At the beginning on this spiritual path, we should be honest, intelligent and kind. To achieve the final bliss of liberation or enlightenment, we have to listen to the Buddha's message with good attention for our knowledge. At the very first level in Buddhism the knowledge is very important. Buddhism describes knowledge as wealth (*Suta Dhanam*). To achieve all kinds of results such as intelligence that Buddhism teaches, knowledge plays a major role. Knowledge only is not enough but reflecting on it again and again is also very important. Furthermore, we have to practice it in our daily life as morality (*Sīla*) and meditation (*Bhāvanā*) to see the results in our life. Meditation is further divided into two as tranquility (*Samatha*) and insight meditation (*Vipassanā*). In short, all doctrines that focus on liberation can be included in three disciplines those are virtue, tranquility and wisdom. This is the way to make a refuge that none can disturb our peace of mind.

The four noble truths should be practice in three levels as;

1. *Sacca Ñāṇa* – Should be understood as a truth
2. *Kicca Ñāṇa* – Should be practiced as realizing, overcoming, experiencing and practicing.
3. *Katha Ñāṇa* – After attaining the liberation, should be known as it's completed.

References:

Mahāvaggapāli, Vinayapitaka
 Sacca samyutta, Samyutta Nikāya
 Sacca Kathā, Patisambhidhamagga, Khuddaka Nikāya
 Sacca Vibhanga, Vibhangappakarana
 Sacca Yamaka, Yamakappakarana



May the Triple Gem Bless you!

The Annual Monastic Retreat Conducted by The Bhāvanā Society,
 West Virginia – 2023 June (21th Wednesday)